
Adoption and Race: Implementing the Multiethnic Placement Act and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions

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Passage of the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 (MEPA) and the 1996 provisions on Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption (Interethnic Adoption Provisions) provides an ideal opportunity to examine what can be done to increase adoptions of foster children, particularly children of color. To assist states and child welfare professionals in serving children better and meeting legal obligations, this article discusses racial matching, MEPA, and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions. Implications for practice and challenges in implementing the law also are discussed. The article suggests principles for adoption practice, recruitment, and placement that provide a framework for simultaneously meeting the requirements of the law and serving the best interests of children. Recommendations for practice, policy, and research are offered.

Key words: *adoption; Interethnic Adoption Provisions; Multiethnic Placement Act; racial matching*

Until recently, with the passage of the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 (MEPA) (P.L. 103-382, §§551-553, 108 Stat. 3518) and the Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption (Interethnic Adoption Provisions), adoption policies and practices throughout the country favored racially matched placements (Alexander & Curtis, 1996). Such placements were considered consistent with good social work practice and in the best interests of children. Using race categorically or presumptively to delay or deny adoptive or foster care placements is now prohibited under the

new law. Race still can be among the factors considered, however, when making placement decisions about a particular child. Although the sanctions to be taken against states found in violation of the law are described explicitly in the Interethnic Adoption Provisions, it is not clear how much weight race can be given without constituting unlawful discrimination. Therefore, at a time when they will be held more accountable for their decisions, child welfare professionals will be required to exercise greater expertise and judgment in determining how to consider race when making placement

decisions. This article aims to assist states and child welfare professionals in implementing MEPA and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions.

The Adoption and Race Work Group

This article is the product of nearly two years of analysis of racial matching and the child welfare services system by the Adoption and Race Work Group (the Work Group) assembled by the Stuart Foundation. Goals of the Stuart Foundation include strengthening the foster care system and improving child welfare practice. Thus, the board of the Stuart Foundation has been especially concerned about reports of African American children remaining in foster care longer than other children, perhaps as a consequence of racial matching policies and practices. The Stuart Foundation's Work Group was convened initially to examine how race influences child welfare services policy and practice. Passage of MEPA and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions narrowed the Work Group's focus to analyzing how to implement the new law effectively and increase adoptions of foster children in need of permanent homes, particularly foster children of color. Assembling the Work Group also provided an opportunity for experts with varying and often conflicting perspectives on racial matching and transracial placements to attempt to reach consensus on policies and practices that are congruent with the law and that promote the best interests of children served by the child welfare services system.

The steering committee of the Work Group was made up of two chairs (one African American and one white) with significant knowledge of adoption policy and practice, two child welfare researchers from the University of California in Berkeley (one African American and one white), and a representative from the Stuart Foundation (African American). The steering committee selected 11 other Work Group members known for being leading adoption figures in California and in Washington—the two states in which the Stuart Foundation funds projects. Selected from various state, county, and private agencies and institutions, Work Group members included child welfare workers, administrators, researchers, lawyers, and policymakers. Barring the steering committee

the Work Group was made up of three African American members and eight white members.

Controversy Surrounding Racial Matching and Transracial Adoption

Given the emphasis that has been placed on racial matching for more than three decades, both in practice and in law, it is understandable that the new law would elicit strong reactions in some child welfare professionals and researchers (for example, see Abdullah, 1996). Often those reactions are grounded in experiences and observations of unfair treatment of and discrimination against people of color by the child welfare system and society (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Courtney et al., 1996; Pierce & Pierce, 1996). At the same time, the child welfare system's primary goal is to promote children's well-being by helping them achieve safe and permanent homes (Berrick, Needell, Barth, & Jonson-Reid, 1998). The discrepancy between the child welfare system's purported aim and its historical treatment of children and families of color has contributed to the long-standing controversy in child welfare regarding racial matching and transracial adoption.

Child welfare professionals who favor efforts to place children in racially matched homes often are concerned that transracial placements are detrimental to children's overall well-being, including children's adjustment to adoption, their self-esteem, and their ethnic or racial identity (see Andujo, 1988; DeBerry, Scarr, & Weinberg, 1996; McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, & Anderson, 1982). Moreover, it has been suggested that the energy placed on transracial adoption could better be spent by addressing ways to prevent the need to remove children of color in the first place and by increasing efforts to reunify them with their biological families if removal does occur (see Penn & Coverdale, 1996). There also has been some concern that transracial adoption practice detracts from efforts to recruit and prepare same-race families for children of color who are in need of adoption services (Alexander & Curtis, 1996). Child welfare professionals advocating less emphasis on racial matching disagree that transracial adoption is harmful to children's development and well-being (Feigelman & Silverman, 1983;

Simon, Altstein, & Melli, 1994; Vroegh, 1992). Some advocates of this position also view racial matching policies and practices as discriminatory and in violation of U. S. civil rights laws (Bartholet, 1991). Consequently, some consider transracial adoption practice to be an attempt to atone for past and current discrimination against children of color by providing them with the benefits of permanency.

The Work Group's Perspective

The concerns of the Work Group typically mirrored the concerns already discussed in this article. Despite very different perspectives on racial matching within the Work Group, there was consensus that race should not be ignored when making placement decisions and that children's best interests are served—all else being equal—when they are placed with families of the same racial, ethnic, and cultural background as their own. Notwithstanding, members of the Work Group also agreed that transracial adoption is appropriate for children, regardless of their race. The issue of delay, the Work Group concluded, is really the central issue to consider when weighing the benefits of racial matching or transracial adoption. Furthermore, the Work Group concluded that, regardless of personal views, child welfare professionals are obligated to comply with the law. Therefore, it was the opinion of the Work Group that child welfare professionals would be well served to receive guidance and training about the history and purpose of the new law as well as about how to meet the requirements of the law and promote children's best interests.

History and Purpose of MEPA

Congress passed the Howard M. Metzenbaum Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 (MEPA) out of concern that racial matching policies had contributed to a delay in placing children of color in adoptive homes, thereby discriminating against children and families on the basis of race. Congress found that approximately 500,000 children were in foster care in the United States and that tens of thousands of these children were waiting for adoptive homes (MEPA, 1994). Congress also found that children wait a median of two years and eight

months to be adopted, and studies indicated that African American children wait longer than other children (for example, see Barth, Courtney, Berrick, & Albert, 1994; MEPA, 1994).

The 1994 proposal by Senator Metzenbaum to limit racial matching was quite controversial. Although long-standing child welfare policy recognized race and ethnicity as legitimate factors to be considered in evaluating a child's needs and the ability of a family to meet those needs, some commentators argued that race-matching policies had been taken too far and were having a severely negative effect on children of color by delaying or denying adoptive placements (Bartholet, 1991). Others argued that children had the right to be placed in homes of the same race and culture when possible.

Congress had little empirical data on the effects of same-race placement preferences and had to rely largely on anecdotal evidence. The debate on racial matching was complicated by news reports of children who had been removed from long-term transracial foster placements to achieve racial matching, by the testimony of white prospective adoptive parents who reported they had been denied the opportunity to adopt solely on the basis of race, and by arguments that communities of color had been excluded from participating as adoptive and foster parents because of institutional and historical racism. The congressional debate on MEPA reveals an attempt to reconcile the arguments on all sides. The result of this debate was a compromise bill that had three goals: (1) decreasing the length of time children wait to be adopted, (2) preventing discrimination in the placement of children on the basis of race, color, or national origin, and (3) facilitating the identification and recruitment of foster and adoptive families that can meet the needs of children needing placement (MEPA, 1994). To achieve these goals, MEPA stated that federally funded agencies and entities may not "categorically deny to any person the opportunity to become an adoptive or a foster parent, solely on the basis of the race, color, or national origin of the adoptive or foster parent, or the child, involved" (42 U.S.C. §5115a(a)(1)(A)) or

“delay or deny the placement of a child for adoption or into foster care, or otherwise discriminate in making a placement decision, solely on the basis of the race, color, or national origin of the adoptive or foster parent, or the child, involved” (42 U.S.C. §5115 a(a)(1)(B)). MEPA required states to develop plans for the diligent recruitment of potential foster and adoptive families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the state for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed (42 U.S.C. §622(b)(9)). MEPA did not exclude the consideration of race from all placement decisions. Rather, it permitted agencies to consider the racial, ethnic, or cultural background of each child and the capacity of the prospective foster or adoptive parents to meet the needs of a child of this background as one of a number of factors used to determine the best interests of the child (42 U.S.C. §5115a(a)(2)).

On April 25, 1995, the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) published *Policy Guidance on the Use of Race, Color or National Origin as Considerations in Adoption and Fostering* (*Guidance*) in the *Federal Register* to assist agencies in complying with MEPA and related provisions of the U. S. Constitution and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (P.L. 88-352). *Guidance* explains that states and agencies may take race into consideration only to the extent necessary to advance the best interests of the child being placed. *Guidance* provides examples of policies and practices that clearly violate MEPA or Title VI, including policies and practices that establish time periods during which only a same-race or same-ethnicity search will occur; establish orders of placement preferences based on race, culture, or ethnicity; require caseworkers to justify transracial placements specially; or otherwise have the effect of delaying placements, either before or after termination of parental rights, to find a family of a particular race, culture, or ethnicity.

According to *Guidance* (DHHS, 1995), consideration of race, culture, or national origin is permissible only when the agency has made a narrowly tailored, individualized determination that the facts and circumstances of a particular case require such consideration to advance the best interests of the child in need of placement. Examples of circumstances in which race or ethnicity can be considered when making a determination of a particular child's best interests include children who have lived in one racial, ethnic, or cultural community and have developed a strong sense of racial, ethnic, or cultural identity. These considerations, however, may not be applicable for all children. For instance,

Guidance suggests that infants or very young children may not have acquired needs based on race, culture, or ethnicity and, therefore, that there is little or no basis for placing them in racially matched homes. *Guidance* does state, however, that such a determination must be individualized.

Expanding on MEPA, *Guidance* (DHHS, 1995) emphasizes the importance of establishing adequate

pools of families capable of promoting available children's development and case goals to achieve timely and appropriate placements. According to *Guidance* this requires each agency's recruitment process to focus on developing a pool of potential foster and adoptive parents willing and able to foster or adopt children in need of placement. The failure to conduct recruitment in a manner that seeks to provide all children with the opportunity for placement and all qualified members of the community with the opportunity to adopt is inconsistent with the goals of MEPA.

Interethnic Adoption Provisions

On August 20, 1996, President Clinton signed new federal legislation entitled *Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption* (*Interethnic Adoption Provisions*) (P.L. 104-188, §1808, 110 Stat. 1755), which repealed and replaced some

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of the provisions of MEPA. The new law provided that any person or government involved in adoption or foster care placements may not "deny to any person the opportunity to become an adoptive or foster parent, on the basis of the race, color, or national origin of the person, or the child, involved" (42 U.S.C. §471a(3)(A)). This provision deleted the words "categorically" and "solely" from the language in MEPA. The provisions also stated that any person or government involved in adoption or foster care placements may not "delay or deny the placement of a child for adoption or into foster care, on the basis of the race, color, or national origin of the adoptive or foster parent, or the child involved" (42 U.S.C. §471a(3)(B)) (deleting the phrase "or otherwise discriminate in making a placement decision" and the word "solely" from the language in MEPA). In addition, the new law added enforcement provisions that specify the fiscal sanctions to be imposed by DHHS for violation of the law and gave individuals the right to sue in federal court if the law is violated. The Interethnic Adoption Provisions did not repeal or amend the diligent recruitment requirements of MEPA. States are still required to "provide the diligent recruitment of potential foster and adoptive families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the State for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed" (42 U.S.C. §622b(3)(9)). DHHS (1997) issued an "Information Memorandum" clarifying Congress's intent to eliminate delays in placement where delays are in any way avoidable. The memorandum re-emphasizes that race, culture, or ethnicity may not be used as the basis for delaying or denying foster or adoptive placements. Any decision, according to the memorandum, to consider these factors as necessary elements of a placement decision must be based on concerns arising from the circumstances of the individual case.

Challenges in Implementing the New Law

The legal mandates of MEPA and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions do not translate easily into child welfare settings or social work practice. As a result, child welfare professionals will face many challenges in implementing the new law. The Work Group identified six issues that

contribute to these challenges: (1) controversial nature of the subject matter, (2) lack of clarity in the law, (3) unrealistic assumptions and expectations, (4) lack of information, (5) competing interests and lack of control over significant factors, and (6) lack and poor use of resources.

Controversial Nature of the Issues

The passage of MEPA and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions has not resolved the controversy over racial matching policies and transracial adoptions. Although the law prohibits categorical assumptions about the benefit of same-race placements, child welfare workers still will have to make decisions about the importance of race in the life of an individual child and whether there are reasons that the best interest of the child requires consideration of race. The elimination of MEPA's provision specifying when race is a permissible factor could leave even more discretion to child welfare professionals. Child welfare professionals, like others, may have personal views that will affect the way they implement the law. Those who believe that same-race placements generally are preferable may feel resentful that federal policy now contradicts their conviction and routinely calls for them to place children without giving weight to the child's race. Those who place little value on racial matching may have difficulty identifying children who do have a specific need for a same-race placement.

Lack of Clarity in the Law

The federal statute and the DHHS *Guidance* provide only broad guidelines, leaving the decision in each case to the professional judgment of the worker. Federal law gives little direction to child welfare workers about how to evaluate the importance of race in a child's life. In addition, key provisions, such as "delay" in placement, are not defined. MEPA and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions also seem to give contradictory messages about recruitment. Although it encourages targeted recruitment to reach communities of color, the law prohibits discrimination on the basis of race. It may be possible to construct policies that walk a fine line between targeting communities of color that have been excluded from past recruitment

efforts while simultaneously welcoming all prospective parents regardless of race, but courts may not agree that agencies have drawn the line properly.

Unrealistic Assumptions and Expectations

An important goal of MEPA was to reduce the time that children wait for adoptive homes. This expectation assumes that racial matching policies have had a substantial effect on delays or denials of adoption for many children. The child welfare system is complex, however, and many factors affect how quickly and whether at all an adoptive placement is made. Searches for missing parents, crowded court dockets, confusion about the standards for terminating reunification services, the reluctance of some judges to terminate parental rights, lengthy appeals, lack of resources, high caseloads, adoptive parents' unwillingness to accept children of certain backgrounds or with particular characteristics, and the limitations of adoption assistance and other postadoption support are just some of the factors (Cahn & Johnson, 1993).

Lack of Information

No empirical studies either support or refute the value of racial matching, nor do any studies definitively evaluate the effect of same-race placement policies on the length of time a child waits for an adoptive home. There also is very little information on the role of race in the development of a child's self-esteem or ability to adjust or about how these issues play out for children who have been adopted. In addition, information about how to assess a child's needs based on race, how to evaluate the needs of children with mixed heritage, how to assess a family's ability to meet the child's needs related to race, and how to provide effective support to families who adopt transracially is only now emerging. Information about successful programs that attract and retain families is also lacking or underused.

Competing Interests and Lack of Control Over Significant Factors

Implementation of MEPA and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions falls to policymakers and administrators who must guide child welfare

workers in satisfying many competing interests. But child welfare workers lack control over many of the factors that affect placement. For instance, early foster care placements may not take into consideration a child's needs related to race and ethnicity, although such placements often become long term. The child's relationship to these caretakers, along with statutory foster parent preferences, then limits the discretion of the adoption placement worker in choosing adoptive families. Moreover, both foster and adoptive placements involve numerous and possibly conflicting factors, such as the need for family reunification, placement with relatives, keeping siblings together, and proximity to the child's family, community, or necessary services.

Lack and Poor Use of Resources

The changes in federal law did not come with additional resources. Given the increasing burdens on child welfare agencies and the decreasing resources available to them, it will be difficult to find the time, funding, and other support needed to implement federal law properly. Training in MEPA, for example, has been limited. Moreover, it is possible that available resources are not used as effectively and efficiently as they could be.

Child Welfare Services Principles

Development of Principles

Anticipating some of the challenges to implementing the new law, the Work Group developed *Child Welfare Services Principles of Practice*. Although the principles are intended to assist child welfare administrators and workers in meeting the requirements of the law, they also are designed to increase the number and enhance the quality of adoptions. In developing the principles, the Work Group was especially concerned about the suggestion by the federal guidelines that consideration of race, ethnicity, and culture generally is not appropriate when making decisions about infants and very young children. Some members of the Work Group saw little merit in distinguishing younger from older children because of the eventual growth of infants and young children into race-conscious

teenagers and adults who will live in a race-sensitive society. Notwithstanding, the Work Group generally agreed that at a very early age, children become aware that race matters in the United States and that certain racial and ethnic groups are more privileged and powerful than others. Some Work Group members affirmed that the way children integrate this "difference" into their personal identities is important, particularly for transracially adopted children who probably will have to contend with institutional and societal racism, as well as with learning a different cultural reality than they would have in their biological families. Some members of the Work Group further held that the way parents respond to and prepare children for living in a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse and prejudiced society is key to the successful coping of children, especially children of color. Consequently, the Work Group resolved that adoptive parents should help their children learn to value the racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage of their biological families to encourage the development of a strong sense of self and a secure self-esteem.

Several Work Group members also pointed out that children learn not only by receiving instruction directly, but also by observing and modeling the behavior and attitudes of their parents and other family members. African American children, for example, gain intangible benefits from watching African American family members function in the world and respond to social pressures such as those presented by racism. The importance of modeling, the Work Group concluded, suggests that same-race placements have value even for young children of color who have not yet developed a racial identity. Therefore, most members of the Work Group supported the position that transracially adoptive parents should make special efforts to include in their children's lives role models and other individuals who are the same race or ethnicity as the transracially adopted child.

Another major concern for some members of the Work Group was that the call for more vigorous recruitment of families of color would be downplayed or ignored altogether by states and agencies. Several Work Group members insisted that for MEPA to benefit children, its recruitment guidelines would have to be strictly monitored and enforced. Others were less optimistic that more recruitment of families of color would occur or that more recruitment would have a substantial effect on reducing delays in placement. Yet the Work Group concurred on the importance of outreach to and communication with families that traditionally have not been recruited and prepared for adoption.

The major concerns just described have been incorporated into the child welfare services principles that follow. The Work Group first used the adoption practice and child welfare literatures, case studies, and alternative conceptualizations of recruitment and placement to develop recruitment and placement principles. The principles, the relevant literature, and Work Group members' knowledge and experiences then were used to formulate general principles of adoption practice. Finally, all principles were reviewed and refined numerous times by the Work Group members, as well as by outside reviewers with relevant expertise, so that they would be consistent with the law, the DHHS *Guidance*, and good child welfare practice. However, some outside reviewers still argue that the principles emphasize race more than the law allows.

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General Principles of Adoption Practice

The purpose of adoption practice is to provide permanent families for children whose parents are unable to care for them. The following principles can be used to guide general recruitment and placement activities and to ensure that the best interests of waiting children are

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met and that there are families available who are capable of meeting the needs of those children. Principles should be considered in relation to each other and in the context of the best interests of children needing permanent homes. In some instances, the principles presented are abbreviated versions of those found in the report on which this article is based. The Stuart Foundation report, on which this article is based, also contains case studies illustrating possible applications of some of the principles.

Principle 1. The child, not the prospective adoptive family, is the primary focus of adoption services. Services should be provided to families who are capable of promoting healthy development and meeting the greatest possible range of needs of available children.

Principle 2. The foundation of adoption planning and decision making should be the best interests of the individual child. Among the factors that should be taken into consideration in assessing the child's best interests are the child's emotional and behavioral development and background; age, temperament, cognitive functioning, level of physical activity, medical needs, and other special developmental considerations; history of neglect and abuse; placement history and experiences; relationships with biological parents and kin; and relationships with the prospective adoptive family. The racial, ethnic, and cultural background and the capacity of the prospective adoptive family to raise a child of that background can be considered in special circumstances.

Principle 3. Children in need of adoption services should be placed as soon as possible, consistent with their best interests.

Principle 4. Multiple placements are not in children's best interests and should be avoided. Decisions to move a child into or out of a home should not be based on the race, ethnicity, or culture of the child or prospective family involved, unless that child has demonstrable needs relating to race, ethnicity, or culture that outweigh the benefits of keeping the child in the present placement.

Principle 5. General recruitment activities should be comprehensive, targeting foster and adoptive parents who reflect the racial and eth-

nic diversity of the children needing placement and who are able to meet the multiple needs of available children. Targeted recruitment should include the child's extended family and people who have a relationship with the child. A racially and ethnically diverse pool of prospective applicants should be readily available; from this pool, parents can then be assessed for their capacity to meet a given child's needs.

Principle 6. Foster care and emergency placements can become the children's permanent placements. Therefore, all placement decisions should consider the current and future best interests of the child.

Principle 7. All prospective adoptive and foster families should be assessed for their parenting ability. The same assessment standards, based on prevailing adoption assessment criteria, should be applied to both adoptive and foster placements. Foster families should not face additional burdens in adopting a child in their care. When a prior determination of the appropriateness of the home for a specific child is precluded by the emergency nature of the placement, an assessment of both the placement and of the child's extended family should be made immediately.

Principles of Recruitment Practice

The goal of recruitment practice is to recruit prospective foster and adoptive parents from all races, ethnicities, and cultures who are capable of meeting the needs of available children. Recruitment is involved in all phases of foster care and adoption planning. Therefore, recruitment should be conceptualized as a process that overlaps with adoption placement, rather than as a linear process that inevitably proceeds from general and specific recruitment to screening, to foster parent and adoption training, to a home study, and finally to placement. General recruitment efforts should be proactive, aggressive, and ongoing. Recruitment practices should be directed by the best interests of available children in accordance with recruitment practices that have been shown to be effective and by the following principles.

Principle 1. Agencies should respond promptly to inquiries about available children and provide accurate profiles of children currently

available for adoption. Profiles should contain complete information about the children, including their strengths and the likely challenges of adopting them.

Principle 2. Agencies should assist applicants in conducting a preliminary self-assessment of their interest in and suitability for adopting available children. Applicants who assess themselves as not interested in or unsuitable for adopting available children should not be encouraged to pursue a home study. Social worker judgment about the accuracy of the family's self-assessment should be judiciously applied to determine whether a home study will be made available to the family.

Principle 3. Applicants and agencies should make decisions about the applicant's capacity to parent an available child based on information gathered throughout recruitment, including orientation, a self-assessment, group adoption and foster care preparation and training, and the home study.

Principle 4. Agencies should encourage individuals to enter the pool of prospective parents unless applicants or their applications are clearly inappropriate according to explicit and predetermined criteria and qualifications. Applicants whose goal it is to adopt newborns and other children generally not available from public agencies should not be encouraged to enter the pool.

Principle 5. Agencies should not discourage applicants on the basis of their race or ethnicity. Applicants' race or ethnicity should be considered when setting recruitment and home study priorities only as necessary for meeting the needs of waiting children who have demonstrable needs for same-race placement.

Principle 6. Agencies are not obligated to conduct a home study of applicants in the order of their request. A variety of factors can be weighed in determining the order in which applicants are provided a home study, with the primary factor being the likelihood that an applicant is willing and able to parent an available child.

Principles of Adoption Placement Practice

The goal of adoption placement practice is to provide appropriate and well-prepared families

for children in need of permanent families. Children need safe and nurturing families capable of helping them achieve and maintain maximum self-sufficiency as adults. Therefore, children should be placed with families that can meet their developmental needs as well as their needs for stability, belonging, and attachment. Placement decisions should be based on thorough assessments of individual children and on the ability of prospective families to meet a particular child's needs. Placements should be made without delay in accord with children's best interests. To ensure sound decision making, the following principles should be applied, consistent with the best interests of an individual child.

Principle 1. Thorough assessments of children and prospective families should not rely unduly on overly formalistic criteria that create unwarranted barriers to placement.

Principle 2. Assessments of individual children should be based on their strengths and responsive to their cultural backgrounds, using information from the child, the child's caregivers, professionals, and others who know the child well. The assessments should be comprehensive and include medical, psychological, developmental, and educational dimensions. All available information about a child's biological family should be included in assessments, along with evidence of diligent searches for relatives, foster parents, and others who might have an interest in adopting that child.

Principle 3. Assessments of children and prospective families should take into account a child's long-term interests, recognizing that children pass through various developmental stages as they grow and mature.

Principle 4. Children should be prepared for and supported throughout the placement and transition into an adoptive home.

Principle 5. Assessments of prospective families should consist of the families' ability to nurture, support, and reinforce a given child's physical and psychological well-being, including the child's racial, ethnic, and cultural identity.

Principle 6. Adoptive families should be prepared for a child's placement and related transitions by extensive training and by receiving

information from caregivers, professionals, and others who know the child well.

Principle 7. Foster placements should be made without delay whenever the need for foster care arises. Similarly, adoptive placements should be made without delay as soon as a child is available, or is likely to be available, for adoptive placement. Contingency planning for an adoptive placement should be concurrent with efforts to reunify the child's original family. Delay in or denial of foster and adoptive placements cannot be based on the race, color, or national origin of the adoptive or foster parent or the child involved unless it is in the best interest of a specific child and necessary to meet the identified needs of the child.

Principle 8. Postplacement and postfinalization services should be readily available to and appropriate for adoptees and adoptive families.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Passage of MEPA and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions offers child welfare professionals an opportunity to re-examine the principles and practices that have driven adoption services for three decades. This re-examination requires people concerned about foster children who cannot be reunified with biological parents to consider new and more effective ways of recruiting families and placing children in adoptive homes and other permanent alternatives (for example, subsidized guardianships). These considerations should lead to a broad review of barriers to adoption and the continued evolution of adoption into a service that better meets the needs of children and families. We offer the following recommendations with the hope that they will lead to effective implementation of the federal law, consistent with the child welfare principles already discussed, and to more placements for children, particularly children of color. Recommendations focus on three areas: (1) practice guidance and training, (2) recruitment and support, and (3) research and evaluation.

Practice Guidance and Training

To ensure successful implementation of the law, it is our recommendation that child welfare professionals receive practice guidance and training that focuses on the best interests of

children and includes the law's requirements and DHHS policy, that focuses on which practices are permissible and which practices are impermissible, and that focuses on the consequences of noncompliance. We also recommend that child welfare workers receive training on how to assess and document when a child has special needs based on race, ethnicity, or culture, as well as on how to determine when a family is likely or unlikely to meet the needs of a child of a different race or ethnicity.

Recruitment and Support

Congress passed MEPA and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions primarily to increase the number of children of color who are adopted and to decrease the amount of time children of color spend in care before adoption. To achieve these goals agencies must recruit more racially and ethnically diverse families to be adoptive parents and prepare and support other individuals interested in adopting available children. States and agencies should be aggressive in their efforts to recruit and retain families of color—as well as white families—who are capable of parenting available children. To accomplish this goal we recommend that information strategies be developed to inform the public and policymakers about the children who need adoptive homes. Successful strategies for reaching all communities, including communities of color and others that have not been reached through traditional recruitment efforts (for example, kin and gays and lesbians), must be developed, disseminated, and widely implemented. Furthermore, we suggest that barriers to retention of racially and ethnically diverse pools of adoptive and foster parents be identified and removed, that culturally sensitive services and supports be provided to families of color who express an interest in adopting an available child, and that agencies provide pre- and postadoption services and supports to all adoptees and adoptive families.

Research and Evaluation

Although there exists a considerable amount of information about child welfare services and children of color, more information is needed about the policies and practices that

bring children of color into the system, as well as about the effect on all children of child welfare policies and practices. A better understanding of these issues is crucial to the discussion surrounding racial matching. Thus, we encourage child welfare researchers and professionals to continue conducting independent and collaborative research on racial matching, transracial adoption, MEPA, and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions. Further research and evaluation should ask the following questions: What contributes to the delays in placement that children of color experience? Is there an available pool of families of color interested in adopting children of color? Is there an available pool of white families interested in adopting children of color? What is the effect of MEPA and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions on the child welfare services system? What role does race play in the development of self-esteem, adjustment, and well-being, particularly for children who are adopted transracially? Is the type of placement (same-race compared with transracial) related to racial identity of adoptees, and is racial identity related to adjustment of adoptees?

Throughout the two years of analysis of racial matching and transracial adoption by the Adoption and Race Work Group, it became clear, despite strong positions held by some members, that no one was absolute in his or her position. That is, all Work Group members acknowledged the importance of considering the circumstances of each individual child. Members who placed more value on racial matching conceded that there were situations in which transracial adoptions are appropriate for children. Similarly, members who placed less value on racial matching conceded that there were situations in which race and racial matching are important considerations for children. Perhaps our most important recommendation, then, pertains to the manner in which racial matching and transracial adoption are viewed and discussed in child welfare. Rather than conceptualizing and referring to perspectives of racial matching in terms of those who only support or only oppose transracial or same-race adoptions, it may be more productive to regard the issue in terms of assessing, deciding, and docu-

menting when the law allows us to place more or less emphasis on race and racial matching and when good social work practice calls for it. ■

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